

VZCZCXR07401  
OO RUEHBI  
DE RUEHLM #0172/01 0311235  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 311235Z JAN 06  
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2476  
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9225  
RUEHKKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 8884  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 3803  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 5769  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2813  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1998  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0741  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 2925  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4323  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6321  
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0004  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0985

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000172

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS  
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2016  
TAGS: PTER PHUM PGOV CE  
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: LTTE-AFFILIATED CHARITY WORKERS  
REPORTEDLY ABDUCTED NEAR ARMY CHECKPOINT

REF: A. COLOMBO 0152

- ¶B. 05 COLOMBO 0786
- ¶C. 05 COLOMBO 0569
- ¶D. COLOMBO 0134

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

¶1. (C) The lull in violence since the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) agreed on January 25 to meet in Geneva in February for talks to strengthen the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was marred January 30 by the reported abductions of five Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) staff members near an Army checkpoint in the north-central district of Polonnaruwa. A January 30 press statement from the LTTE-affiliated charity accused "paramilitaries" of kidnapping the four men and one woman. The abductions, which occurred on the same day that Karuna, the leader of the eponymous dissident LTTE faction, declared a unilateral ceasefire with the rival mainstream "Wanni" LTTE, indicate how difficult it may be for the GSL to rein in anti-LTTE paramilitaries in the run-up to CFA talks. The Ambassador has urged several senior GSL leaders to sort out this incident quickly, and the Embassy issued a press statement on January 31 expressing concern at the reported abductions and urging resolution and restraint. Text of the statement follows in Para 7 below. End summary.

-----  
TROUBLE FOR TRO  
-----

¶2. (SBU) At about 2:00 p.m. local time on January 30, one female and four male employees of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-affiliated charity Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) were reportedly abducted about 100 meters

from an army checkpoint near Welikanda in the north-central district of Polonnaruwa. (Note: Despite its links to the LTTE, TRO is a registered NGO in Sri Lanka, as well as in numerous other countries, including the U.S., and maintains offices in government-controlled territory in the north and east. End note.) According to a TRO press statement, the five missing personnel had been traveling from the eastern district of Batticaloa north to Vavuniya with ten other staff members when their vehicle, which had already crossed the Army checkpoint, was cut off by a white van. The five abductees were reportedly hustled into the van and disappeared; the remaining ten personnel, who were all apparently new employees/trainees, were "assaulted," according to the TRO website, but released and permitted to return to Batticaloa. An NGO source in Batticaloa in contact with the TRO office there told us that, according to the ten remaining TRO staff left behind in the incident, the vehicle was stopped by eight armed men wearing civilian clothes. One of the men spoke fluent Tamil; the leader of the group spoke Sinhala and appeared to be prompting the Tamil speaker. The five abductees work in the accounts division of the Batticaloa office; the woman is a university student and only works part-time.

¶3. (SBU) Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) Spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir confirmed to poloff on January 31 that TRO had filed a complaint with the Nordic-sponsored truce monitors and that SLMM's Batticaloa office was investigating the incident. She said it seemed "pretty clear" that the five had indeed disappeared as alleged but could not confirm the TRO claim, posted on its website, of the involvement of "paramilitaries." Despite the location of a Sri Lanka Army (SLA) checkpoint so close to the reported kidnapping,

COLOMBO 00000172 002 OF 003

military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told poloff that the security forces had no knowledge of or information on the incident and that SLA soldiers in the area had not observed any suspicious activity at the time of the incident.

Polonnaruwa Superintendent of Police Piyaratne told POL FSN on January 31 that local police had not received any complaints of abductions and had no knowledge of the reported incident.

-----  
THE USUAL SUSPECTS  
-----

¶4. (SBU) The TRO office in Batticaloa has been hit with grenades and gunfire on three separate occasions over the past year; in the most recent incident a security guard was killed. Although the January 30 TRO press release stops short of identifying the "paramilitaries" it believes abducted the five, the appellation is widely assumed to mean the dissident Karuna faction, which is based in Batticaloa and operates a camp under the shadow of the SLA checkpoint in Welikanda (Refs B and C). (Comment: It is also widely assumed that the Karuna faction operates with some degree of Government support and/or acquiescence. The military has consistently denied any such links.) Local press on January 31 reported a statement issued by Karuna, who has been in hiding since he broke with LTTE headquarters in March 2004, declaring a unilateral ceasefire with the LTTE before talks on strengthening the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), which the LTTE and Government have agreed to hold in Geneva in February (Ref A). The statement had not, however, been posted on www.tmvvp.org, the official (albeit not very well maintained) website of Karuna's political front, as of close of business January 31. Both Olafsdottir and Samarasinghe noted to poloff a dramatic decrease in ceasefire violations since the LTTE's January 25 agreement to meet in Geneva.

¶5. (C) When the Ambassador raised the reported disappearances with Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga in a January 31 telephone conversation, urging the GSL to take quick action, Weeratunga replied that President

Rajapaksa had asked the Chief of Defense Staff for a full report. Speculating on possible perpetrators, Weeratunga said that a number of actors could be responsible, possibly including "the military or paramilitaries." In a separate conversation later the same day, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa told the Ambassador that the Inspector General of Police had sent a special team to Welikanda to look into the incident. Rajapaksa went on to indicate some skepticism about the credibility of the report, asserting that none of the SLA soldiers at the nearby checkpoint had observed any suspicious activity and questioning why news of the abductions did not reach Colombo until the following day.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶6. (C) Not all of the elements of the reported kidnappings necessarily add up (including, as the Defense Secretary points out, why it took so long for the news to reach the capital), and more details may emerge later. Nonetheless, now that the LTTE has agreed to ceasefire talks, it is more important than ever that President Rajapaksa take firm and immediate steps, as Under Secretary Burns urged him in their January 23 meeting (Ref D), to restrain the anti-LTTE paramilitaries that have waged a "shadow war" on the Tigers for the past year and a half. Although Rajapaksa has repeatedly expressed his intention to do so, if the reports of the abductions are accurate, this may prove easier said than done. The alternative political movement to the LTTE the GSL originally hoped would form around Karuna has so far

COLOMBO 00000172 003 OF 003

failed to materialize; instead, the dissident faction seems to constitute little more than a band of professional assassins and grenade throwers. The former LTTE commander and his cadres, who make their living by violating the ceasefire, likely have little desire for talks to strengthen the CFA and plenty of reasons to try to undermine them. The GSL must address the reported abductions now through a thorough and impartial investigation or risk seeing the hard-won agreement for talks in Geneva unravel.

-----  
PRESS STATEMENT  
-----

¶7. (U) Begin text of Embassy press statement released January 31:

The U.S. Embassy is concerned about the reported January 30 kidnapping of five members of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) at Welikanda in Polonnaruwa District. The Embassy urges the relevant authorities to rapidly investigate these allegations. The Embassy again calls on all parties to exercise restraint and calm, especially in the runup to the cease-fire talks in Geneva.

LUNSTEAD